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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature and possibilities of participation as a staff member in an Australian secondary school while holding an academic position with teacher-education responsibilities. This opportunity allowed long-term interests in learning and teacher education to be studied from the perspective of a participant in the life and culture of a school. The author finds the experience personally relevant and notes that themes developed from the experience acted as prompts for discussion during teacher education. In addition, the preservice practicum approach of the university meant that student teachers were in the school with their teacher educator who was also completing a teaching allotment. Reviewing common classroom experiences had a direct impact on the teacher education program. One table summarizes the learning from the teaching experience. (Contains 8 references.) (SLD)

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RESEARCHER AS TEACHER: MAKING THE LEARNING ACCESSIBLE

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Researcher as teacher: Making the learning accessible

Introduction

The potential value for those involved in teacher education to spend time in schools and classrooms is widely accepted. However, details of what experience might be regarded as recent and relevant, how such experience might be organised and how the experience might lead to improvement (in teacher education or education more generally) are scarce. The difficulties the author experienced in trying to arrange a period of classroom teaching on two occasions suggests that the calls for "recent and relevant experience" are mainly rhetoric with little commitment to establishing opportunities for tertiary to school exchanges. Kozol (1992) has observed this "vacuum of sincere intention" as a characteristic of many policy statements in education. This paper explores the nature and possibilities of participation as a staff member in a secondary school while holding an academic position with teacher education responsibilities. It assumes that school level experience can have value beyond the significant personal development for the individuals involved. The teaching experience had the unreserved support of the school. It provided insights into the ideas and perspectives of the next generation. The description of the experience in this paper must not be taken as any criticism of the school which, on any criterion, serves its students and community very well.

The opportunity to complete a teaching allotment in a secondary school allowed long term interests in learning and teacher education to be studied from the perspective of a participant in the life and culture of a school. This participant research perspective significantly alters the way in which research is undertaken and reported and the nature of the new knowledge which is generated (Wagner, 1993). The possibilities within this form of research provide a rationale beyond the superficial calls for teacher educators to have recent and relevant experience (e.g. DEET, 1992). It is these possibilities which will be explored in this paper. The paper begins with some general observations about the nature, possibilities and constraints applying to research conducted by someone who is part of the culture being studied. To illustrate the possibilities a specific experience will be discussed with some of the findings outlined. The paper concludes by arguing for ways in which such experience can be used to improve programs in teacher education.

Participant research: its nature, possibilities and constraints

Participant research (Wagner, 1993) has several forms and makes a strong and growing contribution to educational understanding. Action research involving teachers can be regarded as the epitome of participant research. The long term efforts of teachers in one project (Baird and Mitchell, 1986) provided the stimulus for the author to become a participant and share the experience and perspectives that these teachers were gaining. Indeed there are writers (eg. Stenhouse, 1975) who have argued that ideally research is part of the teaching role and teacher education and the conditions of teaching should be arranged to support this research perspective on teaching.

The experience described in this paper is similar to teacher research although the author was undertaking roles of teacher educator and academic and seeking implications for these roles as well as completing classroom teacher duties. When compared to other research experiences it is worth noting a number of unique features of the participant research experience.

* *The research priorities and agenda need to be responsive to particular contextual situations.* Described in another way completing the job of teaching becomes inseparable from gaining the knowledge and understanding to complete the job more effectively. Each topic and shift in student mood creates new questions which demand immediate attention. Discussions with other participants (students and teachers) introduce alternative interpretations and new data into particular situations. The result is a reactive approach to situations and a search for themes and interpretations which may form a basis for future action. The research is related to the dailiness of the job and cannot be appreciated unless the role is being undertaken.

* *Potential sources of data are almost unlimited.* The classroom provides a rich source of information for the teacher. Good teaching can be described as effective responses to relevant signals in the complex classroom. Teacher research requires documenting potentially relevant events and information to allow for reflection and later testing of ideas with colleagues and participants. In this study a journal record, student responses to curriculum tasks, student views, reactions and reports on selected issues, classroom observations and informal discussions with colleagues provided the data for review and reflection. In addition a teacher colleague spent 10

days providing a "critical friend" perspective on classroom experiences and interviewing all students to record a student perspective on teaching and learning and the various classroom activities we were completing.

* *New knowledge gained is very closely related to the classroom context.* This makes the findings of participant research qualitatively different from other research findings. The close connection with unique contexts makes generalisations to wider contexts difficult to establish. Yet for some audiences the "context embeddedness" provides credibility and understanding as they make "naturalistic generalisations" (Stake, 1978) to their own situations. This observation about the nature of the research findings has implications for the way in which the findings can be reported to audiences in ways that may increase impact (see final section).

* *For the participant researcher, findings and subsequent action are closely connected.* The nature of teaching means that even tentative findings are framed in terms of possible teaching strategies which could improve student learning outcomes. Ideas are therefore instinctively implemented and tested by teachers and therefore findings are continually reinterpreted and developed.

* *The nature of participant research leads to some fundamental differences from the academic research processes.* The outcomes of participative research tend to highlight the complexity of the classroom context rather than simplify our understanding of school and classroom level issues. The qualitative differences in research findings are underlined by the observation that my efforts to seek assistance from the research literature for a range of classroom level issues rarely proved fruitful. The daily concerns of teachers do not connect with the way the research literature is organised and presented. The research questions and audiences differ with participant research approaches having the potential to connect more easily with the practicing teacher concerns in some areas.

* *Participant research is associated with a particular set of moral and ethical constraints.* The research opportunities available in the teaching role lead to specific ethical issues if the research is to be more widely reported. The participant researcher now has to disseminate findings in ways that protect the interests of the

school and the students. There is community acceptance that the teacher should respond to the developing understanding gained by taking a research stance to teaching. The classroom provides a boundary in which a teacher is assumed to be acting in the best interests of the students. If findings are to be reported beyond the classroom it is impossible to guarantee that the best interests of the school and students will be maintained. Even careful presentations are open to differing interpretations and materials can be used in unintended ways as they move into the public domain.

There are moral issues in using quotes and anecdotes to form case studies when students have behaved in accord with the level of confidentiality they expect from a teacher. Various reporting techniques can be used to protect the interests of individual students but two additional safeguards seem necessary in reporting this type of participant research. Firstly, the interests of students can mean that if there is any doubt that the best interests of students can be maintained, such data and issues must remain unreported. Secondly, decisions about the best interests of students and the school must be left with the Principal and staff of the school. An undertaking was given to the school at the outset of this teaching experience that any accounts would be approved before wider dissemination.

Findings from the teaching experience

Table 1 lists a series of statements which represent some of the themes and learning outcomes from the period of teaching. Each statement is incomplete and, as presented, may contribute little to our understanding of teaching and learning. However each statement is a summary of classroom experiences which can provide authentic, vicarious experiences for teachers. The statements in Table 1 therefore act as prompts for extended discussions about teaching and learning. It has been encouraging to see the way teachers have engaged in extensive discussions about teaching and learning after reading the journal record and/or responding to one or more of the statements in Table 1. This confirms the great interest teachers have shown in participant accounts of teacher research (eg. Baird and Mitchell, 1986). In a profession with pressures toward isolation it is clear that teachers will seek opportunities to engage in discussion about teaching and learning. Participant research seems to provide promising ways of involving teachers in learning and teaching. The new knowledge is context dependent and tentative but promotes reflection on individual classroom experiences and the development of personal interpretations.

Two of the themes from Table 1 will be partly developed to illustrate the context from which the theme emerged and the issues and reaction that occurred in discussion with teachers in teacher education seminars.

Table 1

LEARNING FROM A TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Nature of Learning

1 Quality learning requires learner consent.
2 Learning is done **by** rather than **to** students.
3 Student prior experiences are crucial and often do not fit the learning demands expected.
4 Effort and risk taking are critical for learning.
5 Understanding is rarely experienced and not expected for many students.

Creating Conditions for Learning

6 Teacher change precedes student change.
7 Changes in assessment (beliefs and practice) essential. Students must see ideas and activities which improve learning being valued.
8 Self-confidence and trust are critical attributes for students.
9 Need to have a balance between management demands and maintaining learning
10 opportunities in the classroom.
11 Students can have a significant impact on classroom climate. Few students can
12 make a big difference.
There is a limit to the thinking and learning demands that can be placed on students.
Need for teachers to respond to contextual factors and make intuitive decisions rather than always following the plan.

Student Perspectives on Learning

13 Success gained by "right answers" to defined tasks.
14 Enjoyment regarded with suspicion in terms of learning.
15 Lessons with different teachers allow "fresh starts" and defined tasks.
16 Student faith in texts: associated with routine tasks and dependable knowledge.
17 Students wish to be successful but to be seen as "mediocre" by their peers.

Process of Teaching and Learning

18 Effective interventions increase the spread of students.
19 Frequent use of particular teaching strategies leads to passive student responses.
20 Importance of increasing the repertoire of teaching strategies.
21 Finding rare opportunities for active learning in the "dailiness" of schooling.

Overall Reactions

22 Time and careful review are essential for professional development.
23 Importance of a model and language of learning so that students and teachers can discuss teaching and learning issues.
24 Understanding student responses requires details of student and class context (social structures, expectations of other teachers, etc.)

5 Understanding is rarely experienced and not expected for many students

Anecdote 1

As a teacher of Maths and Science one expects to hear students state that they are "no good at Maths" or "never understand Maths". When three 12 year old students state this as they are introducing themselves during the first lesson you realise you are seeing an example of some very powerful if unintended learning.

> *"My name is Rosemary and I am never going to be good at Maths".*

Anecdote 2

Emma: *"Why do we have to do all the problems you set us in each topic?"* (in Mathematics)

J.N.: *"Mmm ... perhaps I would be happy if you stopped when you were sure you understood the idea."*

Emma: *"How would we know that?"*

Gillian: *"What about if you never understood Maths .. but just get the problems right to pass the tests."*

The hope that students would take responsibility for their own learning and gain a feeling of what it means to understand an idea was always present. As one attempt to get students to assess their understanding I introduced a new topic by stating that they could stop doing the examples when they felt they were ready to do my "key problem" on a card on my desk. They could judge when they understood and felt ready to tackle the key problem. In discussion with teachers most predict the outcomes of this intervention. For the majority of students it did cause them to think about whether they understood and were ready to check their understanding. Some were very competitive, keen to be first, some were conservative *"I'll just try one more to be sure"*. A small group (5-7 students) did not have the confidence to come to the front ... *"Maths is not something I ever understand"* (Kylie). The partial success of the intervention provided an example of theme 18 (Table 1) and required further teaching responses to manage the spread of students in completing the topic. There are also connections with themes 1, 2, 4 and 8 in Table 1.

These and other anecdotes associated with this theme connect strongly with teacher concerns and experiences. Related experiences and ideas flow quickly. What can be done to allow students to recognise and appreciate an understanding of an idea?

15 Lessons with different teachers allow "fresh starts" and defined tasks

Taking up a teaching allotment provided opportunities to try some different approaches. The one subject - one teacher pattern of organisation for secondary schools has been questioned with arguments that junior secondary school students may benefit from having contact with fewer teachers. Mathematics and Science seemed to be two subjects which could be presented in an integrated way by one teacher. Further involvement as a Home group/Pastoral care teacher would seem to provide further learning possibilities and the extended contact with one group of students would seem to have self evident benefits. So much for the educational rationale of the teaching allotment ... in practice there was a range of student responses to the extended contact with one teacher.

Anecdote 1

The topic of graphs was introduced in Mathematics but the science course was arranged so that application of the ideas and plotting of the graphs became part of science activities.

Donald: *"Is graphs Maths or Science?"*

J.N.: *"We use them in both subjects."*

Donald: *"But do we have to know them for Maths or Science?"*

Anecdote 2

Carol interviewing two students:

"Is it good having Mr Northfield for Maths and Science?"

Anne: *"I suppose so ... but you sometimes don't know if it is Maths or Science."*

Melanie: *"And if he gets in a bad mood it continues ... you can't make a fresh start ... and you are expected to remember things from other classes."*

For students the subject compartments and different teachers can be a way of reducing learning demands. It is possible to make a fresh start with a new teacher and keep the tasks within defined lesson boundaries. The different subjects and teachers in secondary schools is welcomed by many students producing variation and relief in the school day.

The arguments for having fewer teachers in the transition years between primary and secondary are persistent and many teachers identify with the issue and connect it with their experiences. Is it a good thing that many students adjust quickly to the secondary school pattern? Is the adjustment desirable from a learning demand perspective? Should we be organising schooling to encourage the blurring of subject boundaries? Is it more valuable for students to interact with a large number of teachers or a smaller number? Many teachers see advantages in working with a smaller number of students rather than getting to know 100-200 students in each year, but timetabling difficulties make this difficult to achieve.

Again the anecdotes stimulate teachers to review this current issue and share their experiences.

Each theme has therefore acted as a prompt in teacher education contexts with the anecdotes providing the reality and starting points for fruitful discussion. In this way the school experience has proved relevant for teacher education ... I have had experiences to share which initiate discussion of important issues.

The relevance of the experience for a teacher educator

The benefits of "recent and relevant experience are not self-evident. There is the personal value which would be a benefit for any person who has a wider experience of a situation within their area of responsibility. (This would include politicians, bureaucrats, school administrators.) More specific benefits for a teacher educator are dependent on the way the teacher education program is structured. Sharing experiences with student teachers in "show and tell" sessions would appear to make a minimal contribution to a teacher education program. However, extended workshops with student teachers (preservice) or teachers (inservice) would allow sharing and discussion of experiences and encourage teachers to have confidence in the "authority of their own experience" (Munby and Russell, 1993).

One feature of the preservice practicum arrangements at Monash University provided an opportunity for the teaching experience of the teacher educator to make a significant contribution to the teacher education program. An extended full time school experience meant a group of student teachers were in the school with their teacher educator who was also completing a teaching allotment in the school. Reviewing common classroom experiences became the basis for achieving a direct impact on the teacher education

program. Modelling the value of reflecting on experience in both the student teacher's and teacher educator's classes over an extended period of time could only be achieved because of the way the teacher education practicum was organised.

Gaining recent and relevant experience per se has no value beyond the personal development that can occur. Improvement in the academic role will depend on the purposes for the experience in school and the conditions that might allow impact on subsequent practice. A program of participant research can provide a purpose with will provide a positive contribution to the academic role, if the structure of the teacher education program allows.

At present the case for gaining relevant experience for teacher educators/researchers lacks the rationale and incentives for any widespread support. Academics find it difficult to make arrangements and to an extent give up career opportunities to gain school experience. They need to be reassured that the experience is relevant, valued by peers and will make a worthwhile contribution to their future role. This recent experience was made relevant and valuable in two ways. A preservice practicum structure allowed the teacher educator to be a teacher and colleague for a group of student teachers over an extended period in the school. The shared experiences with student teachers provided starting points for considering education issues rather than systemic issues (Fenstermacher, 1992) and showed that reflecting on practice can indicate future possibilities for improvement in teaching. A second valuable outcome of the teaching experience came from adopting a participant researcher role and documenting experiences which seemed to indicate important themes and issues. Introducing these themes with the experiences in the form of cases has linked with the interests and concerns of many teachers.

I urge researchers who are contemplating returning to schools to have clear purposes and conditions that will allow the experience to improve their contribution as an academic and teacher educator.

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